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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 000525

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SUBJECT: UZBEKS REACT TO EU SANCTIONS DECISION

Classified By: A/DCM Ted Burkhalter; reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Foreign Minister Norov called in Ambassador on May 5, to discuss the April 28 EU decision to continue suspension of visa sanctions. Norov downplayed the EU's recognition of human rights steps the Uzbeks have taken and focused instead on the EU's continued criticism, which he said was not constructive. Drawing on points from President Karimov, FM Norov underscored Uzbekistan's desire to continue mending relations with the U.S., suggesting that the EU approach was not the way to do this. Though the message is not the one we would like to hear, it reflects the Government of Uzbekistan's (and, in particular, President Karimov's) continued inability to absorb negative publicity. It does not, though, negate the small steps the Uzbeks have taken on human rights. Rather, it underscores the importance of the message Assistant Secretary Boucher will deliver when he meets in early June with President Karimov. End summary.

¶2. (C) Norov called Ambassador in on May 5, to discuss the EU decision. As anticipated, the Uzbeks focused not on the EU's recognition of positive steps taken but instead on the EU's criticism of steps that remained. Norov objected to what he and other senior Uzbek leadership have increasingly termed the "double standard" being applied to Uzbekistan, vis-a-vis its neighbors. He asked about U.S. discussions with our European colleagues in the run-up to the sanctions decision, intimating that in the spirit of U.S.-Uzbek reengagement, we could have done more to help the Uzbeks achieve their desired outcome. The Ambassador responded that the EU decision should actually be seen by the Uzbeks as a small victory. The decision, he said, constituted a recognition of modest steps such as ICRC prison visits and prisoner releases and held the possibility of continued rapprochement, if further steps were taken.

¶3. (C) Norov read to Ambassador several points from President Karimov, underscoring Uzbekistan's continued desire for mending relations with the U.S., one step at a time. Norov contrasted the EU approach, as he saw it, with the approach he clearly hoped for from the United States. He dismissed the threat of EU sanctions, saying that positive steps taken recently were in the interests of Uzbekistan and not designed

to please foreigners, and that to the Government of Uzbekistan and to him personally it would make no difference if the EU chose the path of sanctions. "We are an Asian country," he emphasized - as if to mean that Europe did not matter to Uzbekistan. Ambassador assured Norov that the Government of Uzbekistan's opinions were useful in informing U.S. policy but that we also wanted a constructive dialogue on human rights, as part of our broader, balanced relationship. Ambassador asked whether, in this light, the Uzbeks' recent transmittal to Embassy of two volumes on the GOU's investigation of the 2005 Andijon events, which the GOU now refers to as a "tragedy," might presage further dialogue on this most contentious of human rights issues. Norov seemed interested but did not offer a response.

14. (C) Norov at one point raised the role of Human Rights Watch, criticising their previous Uzbekistan country researcher (director), Andrea Berg, for what he called a complete lack of understanding of Uzbek culture. This was the only time in the meeting when Norov visibly betrayed strong emotion. Describing what he said were Berg's published reports on the Uzbek mahalla (neighborhood) committees, he said that this was not objective work. Ambassador did not comment on Berg (who he has never met) but encouraged the GOU to register HRW's newly arrived country researcher, Igor Vorontsov. Norov pointed to HRW's public call on the EU to reimpose sanctions and said he could hardly endorse accreditation under these circumstances (implying Karimov would have his head). Norov accused HRW (and Amnesty International) of being "American organizations," adding that "we all know who funds them." (Norov was equally suspicious

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of the overlap between the EU and NATO membership, seeming not to understand how U.S. influence in the latter organization could differ from U.S. influence in the former.)

Comment:

15. (C) In focusing on the threat of possible future sanctions and downplaying the success for Uzbekistan of the EU's decision to maintain suspension for another six months, President Karimov is telling us (a) he continues to bristle at negative publicity, "pressure," and "double standards" applied to Uzbekistan; (b) he doesn't understand the limits of U.S. influence on the EU or the degree to which the U.S. and Europe see things eye-to-eye on Uzbekistan; (c) he really doesn't "get it" that NGOs truly don't work for governments; and (d) he is ready to entertain further strains in relations with the "marginal" EU but would rather not do so with the U.S. and is trying to peel one off from the other. Assistant Secretary Boucher's anticipated meeting with Karimov in early June in Tashkent will be an opportunity to remind the Uzbek leader once again that (a) NGOs are not secret agents of the USG, (b) pressure for sanctions reflects genuine concern among both western publics and governments about GOU behavior, and (c) now is the time for greater openness on the part of the GOU in order to lend credibility to assertions (such as Karimov's lengthy May 3 decree outlining an "action plan" marking the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights) that human rights are being taken seriously.

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